

## **THE RIDDLE OF KILLING FOR GOD**

**By James A. Haught**

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**Last week, the Bill Moyers public television agency flew me to New York to join a circle of theologians and scholars discussing a baffling question:**

**Why is religion -- which universally teaches love, forgiveness and brotherhood -- entwined in so much murder and hate around the world?**

**As cameras rolled, our eight-member group debated for two hours, but found few answers. At the end, we had no solutions. The contradiction can't even be explained, let alone corrected.**

**My role, as a news editor, was to outline the enormity of the problem, which unfolds day after day in international news reports. My outline went like this:**

**Since the Cold War ended, most of the horrors around the planet have involved religion, in one way or another. America's 9/11 al-Qaida tragedy was a grotesque and spectacular example, but there are many others:**

**Muslims and Christians kill each other daily in Sudan.**

**Hindu Tamils and Buddhist Sinhalese kill each other in Sri Lanka.**

**Catholics and Protestants still kill each other occasionally in Ulster.**

**The tragic civil war that shattered Yugoslavia in the 1990s was between Orthodox Christian Serbs, Catholic Croats and Muslim Bosnians and Kosovars.**

**Previously, the tragic civil war that shattered Lebanon in the 1980s was between militias of Maronite Christians, Shi'ite Muslims, Sunni Muslims, Alawite Muslims, Druses, etc.**

**India is cursed by recurring bloodshed between Hindus, Muslims and occasionally Sikhs. Three of India's Gandhis -- Mohandas, Indira and Rajiv -- were killed by zealots.**

**Muslim fanatics have killed about 100,000 people in Algeria since the early 1990s. True Believers shot high school girls in the face for not wearing veils.**

**Muslim fanatics killed defenseless tourists in Egypt, plus Coptic Christians. They assassinated President Anwar Sadat.**

**Muslims and Christians kill each other sporadically in Nigeria -- and Indonesia -- and Azerbaijan -- and the Philippines, etc.**

**On Cyprus, U.N. peacekeeping troops have been holding Christian Greeks and Muslim Turks apart for three decades, lest they slaughter each other.**

**The Ayatollah Khomeini created the world's cruelest dictatorship in Iran -- then the Taliban created an even-crueler one in Afghanistan. The theocracies were stunningly evil.**

**Fundamentalist extremists occasionally kill doctors and nurses at American abortion clinics.**

**Cults add to the horror. The Waco cult massacre was somewhat a replay of the Jonestown cult massacre. Supreme Truth cultists planted nerve gas in Tokyo's subway to kill commuters. Baghwan Rajneesh cultists planted salmonella germs in salad bars at Oregon restaurants.**

**In all these nightmares, it's extremely difficult to determine whether religion is a major cause, or merely a fringe factor. Most religio-ethnic conflicts also involve politics, language, economics, power-grabbing, demagoguery and other elements. For example, Israel's ghastly conflict is chiefly between Jews and Muslims, yet it's basically a struggle for land. (But recruitment of suicide bombers is easier with the promise that "martyrs" enjoy heaven with lovely houri nymphs.) Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin was assassinated by a fanatic Jew.**

**"Religious tribalism" is a phrase sometimes applied to the Catholic-Protestant strife in Ulster. Many of the hate-filled adversaries never attend church -- yet their family religious labels pit them against each other. From childhood, each Ulsterite knows who's "the enemy" -- it's the people in the opposing religious neighborhoods. Religion separates them into hostile "tribes."**

**Actually, religious killing and persecution are as old as history. A pattern can be traced through the era of human sacrifice, the Crusades, the Inquisition, jihads, witch-hunts, Reformation wars, pogroms, etc.**

**Did you know that Catholic-Protestant strife caused a deadly cannon battle in Philadelphia in 1844? Or that Shi'ite Muslims have massacred thousands of Baha'is in Iran since the offshoot religion began? Or that the world's worst religious war, the Taiping Rebellion, killed an estimated 20 million Chinese in the 1850s?**

**Don't forget the West Virginia textbook war in 1974. Fundamentalists decided that new Kanawha County schoolbooks were "godless." They held stormy protests, staged a school boycott and turned violent. Schools were dynamited. Two people were shot. School buses had bullet holes. A preacher and his followers went to federal prison. Court testimony said they discussed wiring dynamite caps into the gas tanks of cars in which families drove their children to school, defying the boycott. Thank heaven, the militants didn't actually burn kids to death to prove how morally superior they were.**

**When 200 young nightclubbers were killed in Bali this month, it was assumed that the bombs were planted by alcohol-hating, sex-hating, fun-hating, Islamic extremists.**

**When Chechnyan militants seized a Moscow theater last week, they carried Korans and vowed to become "martyrs" while killing "infidels."**

**I won't be surprised if the Washington-area sniper proclaims that he did it for God.**

**The Bill Moyers discussion is expected to air later this year. But it won't settle anything. All the participants -- Moyers, a Muslim scholar, a Princeton philosopher, three Christian theologians, an international writer and I -- were at a loss to decipher the riddle.**

**If anyone knows why religion, which espouses kindness, is stained with so much gore, I wish you'd explain it to me.**

**( Haught, editor of The Charleston Gazette in West Virginia, has written two books on religious strife, "Holy Horrors" and "Holy Hatred." He can be e-mailed at [haught@wvgazette.com](mailto:haught@wvgazette.com) or phoned at 304-348-5199. )**

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